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**Shashi Tharoor: Transmuting Historical and Mythical
Material into Literary Ideas**

M. Venkatesan, M.A., M.Phil.

Adaptation of indigenous myth was regarded as an important mode of retrieval of the past. Using myths drawn from native tradition, postcolonial writers sought to integrate the cultural life of the past with their post-independence reality. They turned to their own cultural tradition both as the source of a new national identity and as a mythic resource with which they structure their works.

Shashi Tharoor adapted myth and real happenings in the past to write his first literary work. He appeared on the literary scene in 1989 with his first work of fiction, *The Great Indian Novel*. The book won two major literary awards and was highly acclaimed by critics in India and abroad.

Myth and Story-writing and Story-telling in Modern Times

Myth has often been defined as a complex of stories some factual and some fictitious and not so real. These represent some deeper experience and understanding of the societies in which they were and are current. The rediscovery of mythology as a twentieth century a literary device prompted creative writers to evince a new interest in the ancient myths.

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Many twentieth century writers consciously used myth as a literary device in their works. In T.S.Eliot's *The Waste Land*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and Eugene O' Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*, for example, old myths reappear with a new meaning and an immediacy of appeal. O' Neill's play is a fresh rendering of an ancient Greek myth; Joyce's novel reinterprets Homer's *Odyssey* in the context of twentieth century Dublin; and T.S.Eliot uses the Grail legend to depict the spiritual crisis of modern man in the wasteland of war –ravaged Europe.

Despite their differences of intentions, scopes and techniques, there is one common factor among these writers. Each of them employs an ancient myth in a contemporary context, thereby attempting to examine the predicament of modern man in a larger perspective of time.

Discovering Connections Between Myth and Reality

An abiding characteristic of the Indian mind has been to discover connections between myth and reality. We have been always been conscious of the recurrence of mythic patterns in contemporary events. Characters from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are perennial contemporaries for Indians who acknowledge the continuing influence of the two national epics on their private and public lives.

The first epigraph to Tharoor's novel, a quotation from C.R.Deshpade's *Transmission of the Mahabharata Traditions*, refers to the lasting influence of Vyasa's epic on India's social and cultural life. "The Mahabharata has not only influenced the literature, art, sculpture and painting of India but it has also molded the very character of the Indian people. Characters from the Great Epic... are still household words, stand for domestic or public virtues or vices... In India a philosophical or even political controversy can hardly be found that has no reference to the thought of the Mahabharata." The second citation from P. Lal's transcreation of the epic, *The Mahabharata of Vyas*, suggests its contemporaneity and continuing relevance "The essential Mahabharata is whatever is relevant to us in the sacred by itself."

***The Great Indian Novel* – Exploitation of Myth and Creation of a Parody**

The Great Indian Novel is *Mahabharata* re-written in which Shashi Tharoor employs myth elaborately to function as the prototype. The ancient epic of Vyasa provides for Tharoor's novel not only the narrative aesthetics but also a pattern of life as well as a value system to refer to.

Tharoor discovers a meaningful correspondence between the new myth of India's freedom struggle and fight for democracy and the epic battle to uphold truth and dharma which took place in the country's fabulous antiquity.

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The account of recent Indian history in his novel reviews the memory of the mythic age and evokes the feeling that contemporary Indian reality can be comprehended in the critical light of the country's mythical past. It suggests that ancient Hastinapur is still found in present-day India.

Humour and Parody

Tharoor flavors the narrative with humour and parody. Pandu's "faithfully infidelious" (86) wives – Kunti and Madri – are presented as ultramodern women who speak English and smoke Turkish cigarettes. Tharoor makes much such deviation from the original myth to fit the historical narrative into the narrative frame of the epic.

Diversion from the Epic

The novel also accommodates a number of incidents from Vyasa's poem – some of them in a slightly modified form – which are not essential for the historical account. For example, the escape of the Pandava brothers from the Jotugriha, their adventures during the period of exile, Arjuna's banishment for a year, his love for the elopement with Subhadra, and his humiliation at the hands of a prostitute named Kameswari. These diverting episodes are introduced to give the novel the amplitude and digressive quality of the epic.

Again, in order to devetall some important episodes from the epic with the chronological frame of the historical narrative, the novelist shifts them into a dream world. These include the murder of Gandhi, the disrobing of D.Mohrasi during Indira Gandhi's rule, and the journey of Yudhishtir to heaven, Tharoor integrates some key episodes from the Mahabharata into the novel in order to project certain important political events of post – independence India allegorically.

The defeat of Hidimba Bhima is presented as a parallel to the liberation of Goa by Indian army from Portuguese occupation, the tearing off the body of Jarasandha into two halves by the second Pandava mirrors the dismemberment of Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh. The humiliating defeat of Sahadeva in the wrestling match with Bakasura during the period of exile reflects India's military debacle during the India-China war in 1962.

Nihilistic Devotion?

The Great Indian Novel is, in fact. Tharoor's version of the present-day *Mahabharata*, and but it is devoid of the original's serious tone. He is neither interested in the epic

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itself nor reverential towards it. He only uses it as a narrative frame to accommodate a different story.

A Subjective Version

The Great Indian Novel replaces the unitary myth of India with a comprehensive, though highly subjective, version of the multi-dimensional reality of the country. It reads like a spoof on the official history of the nation, which is, in Tharoor's opinion, no better than hagiography. He seems to suggest that the version of an individual recollected from memory can also significantly contribute to the making of national history. The novel takes part in the historiographic context and presents the pre- and post-independence history of India from the point of view of an individual, who is both an insider and a participant.

Writers Experience Another View of History

The remark of Gunter Grass, quoted as the third epigraph in the novel, suggests the overall spirit of Tharoor's historical narrative: "writers experience another view of history, what's going on, another understanding of 'progresses, Literature must refresh memory.'" The statement, made in Bombay, stresses the need for fictional reconstruction of history.

According to Grass, writers present an alternative version of history, which is different from the account of professional historians. Their alternative rendering history through fiction not only challenges the official history of a country provided by hagiographers but also refreshes the people's memory of their past.

Reassessment of the Role of Leaders

Tharoor's alternative version of history critically reassesses the role of leader like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, Indira Gandhi, Jayaprakash Narayan and Moraji Desai. Unlike Rushdie, who preferred Nehru, Tharoor gives greater importance to the role of Gandhi. The novel presents a compact but rounded portrait of the Father of the Nation whom contemporary Indians have failed to relate to their lives and hence consigned to the 'mists and myths of historical legend' (47). It recognizes his immense contribution to awaken the people to the evils of British rule.

Parallel Story

In *The Great Indian Novel*, Tharoor takes his readers down through the country's 'tryst with destiny,' with the leading figures from contemporary history cast in the mould of

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great epic characters. Gandhiji, for example, is cast in the role of Bhishma, the celibate Kaurava patriarch, who is obsessed with Truth, nonviolence, “untouchables” and toilet cleaning. He is referred to in the novel as Gagaji (Ganga Dutta) and described by the British Viceroy, Sir Richard, as ‘Public Enema Number one’ (113) Dhritarashtra is blind son of Vichityaviraya and a favorite disciple of Gangaji. The blind son has a weakness for Fabian socialism and is a fatal charmer of the ladies of Bloomsbury. He ‘found education in India a harrowing experience (41) and was sent to England where he acquired ‘ traces of the right accent along with streaks of the wrong ideas’ (110) Later he became the country’s first Prime Minister. Pandu, his pale brother, was expelled from one of the best colleges of the country for striking a British teacher who had called Indians dogs. Fed up of the non-violent way of his mentor, Gangaji, he stormed off to Germany and then to Japan to seek fascist help for the country’s liberation. “Away with Tolstoy, Ruskin, Buddha, Their ideas just make little men littler/No more ‘truth-force,’ only Buddha-/It’s time to learn from that chap Hitler.” (177)

Mohammad Ali Karna, the fruit of the error of Kunti’s adolescence and adopted son of a rich man’s driver, is the lawyer disciple of Gangaji. He has sun-like glow on his face, which distinguishes him from others, and he likes cocktail sausages. He becomes the founder of the Muslim state Karnistan, a country which is carved out of India and which Priya Duryodhani will help split to form Gelabi Desh, The teacher of the five Pandava brothers, who had an engineered birth (‘heir-conditioning,’ [89]), is a bearded socialist named Jayaprakash Drona.

Parody Galore with Historical Truth Mixed Up

The narrative begins with Gangaji’s emergence as a national leader and his election as the President of the Kaurava party which led the country to freedom, and which split after independence, one side going to Priya Duryodhani, Dhritrashtra’s only child with the famous arched brow who, as Prime Minister, imposed a ‘siege’ on the country. It ends with the death of Duryodhani, her murder by her own security guards.

The historical narrative follows the line of the *Mahabharata*, providing insight into both current politics and the epic. The old narrator, Ved Vyas, tells in his story - which is dictated to his amanuensis, the elephant-headed Ganapati...’ of past, present and future, of existence and passing, of efflorescence and decay, of death and rebirth, of what is of what was, of what should have been (13). But in this ‘definitive memoir of life and times’ which is, he claims, ‘nothing less than *The Great Indian Novel*’ (18), history is transformed into myth and the epic characters become figures of contemporary history. The dividing lines between fact and fiction, myth and history become blurred.

History to Suit Novelist's Fiction

Similarly historical events of India's struggle for freedom and her subsequent experiment with democracy are re-organized to suit the novelist's fiction, much in the same way as Rushdie did in *Midnight's children*. The result is defamiliarisation, demystification, and negation of history. There is no clue to reality; nothing can be taken for granted in the uncertain fictional world of Tharoor. Underlying ambiguity and eating history, the text subverts closure and suggests alternative. The narrator says, "for every tale I have told ... every perception I have conveyed, there are hundred equally valid alternatives. I have omitted and there are a hundred equally valid alternatives I have omitted and of which you are unaware... This is my story of the India. I know, with its biases, selections, omissions, distortion, all mine But you can not device your cosmogony from a single birth, Ganpathi. Every Indian must for even carry with him, in his head and heart, his own history of India" (337). It becomes what Roland Barthes would call a 'creative text', which resists finality and remains open to doubt and uncertainty.

More than One Truth, More than One Way

Shashi Tharoor seems to suggest more than one Truth, more than one way of looking at the history and myths which have shaped Indian people and their culture. At one point, the narrator says, almost echoing Saleem Sinai in *Midnight's Children*, that the novel is his version of reality: "It is my truth, Carpathian, Just as the crusade to drive out the British reflected Gangaji's truth and the fight to be rid of bother British and the Hindu was Karna's truth. Which philosopher would dare to establish a hierarchy among such verities?"(164). He asks, "Is it permissible to modify truth with a possessive pronoun?" (164). There is no clear answer in the text but the author seems to suggest that it is permissible.

Like other postmodern writer, Tharoor finds no certitude in any particular ideology or dogma, in any particular view of history and myth. Since history, 'indeed the world, the universe, all human life, and so too, every institution under which we live - is in a constant state of evolution' (245).

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